

Museums for a New Century

A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century

The Charge

To study and clarify the role of museums in society as they carry out their obligations to preserve and interpret our cultural and natural heritage for an ever-broadening audience in an uncertain future.

The Process

In 1982 the American Association of Museums, the nation's oldest and largest organization of museum professionals, assembles a blue-ribbon commission of distinguished museum directors, trustees and foundation and business leaders. Over the next two years the Commission on Museums for a New Century engages thousands of museum professionals, futurists, educators, businessmen, civic leaders, scientists, supporters of the arts and the humanities and members of the general public in activities that focus on the role of museums in society. In open forums and colloquiums, invited experts and commission members examine specific issues related to collections care, education, research, the museum and community identity and the diversity of audiences. Hundreds of hours of tape are transcribed and analyzed. Relevant literatures in economics, demographics, futures research, management and museology are reviewed and synthesized.

Commission members representing museums of every size and specialization from all parts of the country come together four times to analyze and discuss the state of America's museums and forge 16 recommendations to guide them as they move into the 21st century.

The Result

Museums for a New Century

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Not just for the museum community, but for all people everywhere who care about museums, the values they represent and the contributions they make to our collective human experience.

Today, America's nearly 5,000 museums enjoy unprecedented affection and respect from the general public. Never before have so many people visited and participated in the programs of our nation's art, science and history museums, historic sites, science-technology centers, botanical gardens, art centers, planetariums, aquariums, zoos and other cultural and educational institutions that make up the varied and diverse world of museums.

The values museums represent strike a responsive chord for people living in this time of enormous and accelerating change. Institutions that preserve and celebrate our natural and cultural heritage seem to provide a context for understanding the present and anticipating the future. Museums deserve a special place on our personal agendas and in our busy lives.

As the 1980s began, leaders in the museum profession realized that the same changes in society that are making museums popular places are acting in important ways on museums themselves. If museums are to remain as vital in the world of the 21st century as they are today, the profession must identify and respond aggressively to these changes. As one commission member put it, 'We cannot wait for the future to happen; we must embrace it and participate actively in its creation.'

After two years of information gathering, analysis and deliberation, the commission has issued *Museums for a New Century*, a report that delineates the current status and future prospects of America's museums. The significance of this document for the museum profession and for America's cultural life is twofold. It is clearly time for a thoughtful and thorough assessment of the strengths, needs, priorities and possibilities of our nation's museums, but even more important is the role of *Museums for a New Century* in initiating a long-term program of self-evaluation and self-improvement for these institutions and for the entire museum profession.



The report itself is a model of productive self-assessment. Alongside summaries of problems and needs are recommendations for positive action and examples of creative responses by innovative institutions and organizations. A number of the commission's recommendations call for the development of data collection systems that would provide, for the first time, reliable, comprehensive information about the museum universe—its facilities, collections, work force, programming and overall financial picture. Other recommendations address issues of collections care, learning in museums, leadership and professionalism, collaborative efforts, public awareness of museums and financial stability.

Responses to the issues the Commission on Museums for a New Century has identified will determine how successful museums are at retaining their preeminence in our collective educational and cultural lives. These issues were central to the commission's deliberations and served as the basis for its recommendations.

◆ **Collections.** The object is at the core of the museum idea. Through collecting, preserving, researching, interpreting and exhibiting objects, museums fulfill their mission as cultural and educational institutions. Thus issues related to the growth, organization and care of collections are of paramount importance. Determining what should be collected and preserved for future generations is a constant concern. Storage spaces are cramped. Security and conservation are expensive. Duplication of effort can waste precious and limited resources.

The commission recommends carefully planned and coordinated collecting by museums, with stronger federal commitment to the support of collections care. A series of nationwide inventories will facilitate more efficient collecting and more frequent sharing of objects and collections.

◆ **Education.** Millions of schoolchildren visit museums each year, and our growing adult population turns more and more to museums for learning, self-improvement and constructive leisure. Yet the use of the collections for educational purposes is often at odds with the objectives of preservation. And, while there is agreement that a museum visit is educational, there is no adequate understanding of what happens for visitors, or what *should* happen, in the unique learning environment of museums. Obviously accumulating facts is part of the experience, but perhaps only a small part of what happens when we stand awestruck before a case containing the Declaration of Independence, or fascinated by a demonstration of a Foucault

FACTS . . . IDEAS . . . INNOVATIONS . . .

Ideas, solutions, and innovative and successful programs, strategies and institutions like these are discussed in brief reports that accompany the commission's narrative and recommendations.

The number of museums in the country increases every year; in Texas alone there are six times as many as there were 15 years ago.

Recent commissions in the sciences and the humanities have called on museums to play an even stronger role as educational institutions.

The United States is virtually the only major country in the world without a national policy or plan for the conservation of objects in museums.

The number of objects in the care of America's museums is estimated at one billion.

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pendulum or profoundly moved at seeing firsthand a work of art we have only known from textbooks.

High priority must be given to basic research about the ways people learn in museums. The educational needs of a growing adult population, and the quantity and quality of collaborative efforts with the schools also require attention. Museums must examine their internal structures to assure that the educational role is appropriately integrated into all museum functions.

◆ **Leadership and Professionalism.** The museum as an organization exists only so that the museum as an institution may carry out its mission. It is essential that all who work in and for museums understand this relationship. Management decisions must be made in light of esthetic, educational and scientific ends if the museum's *raison d'être* is not to be undermined.

Several staff issues need attention. Museum salaries are often shockingly low. Compensation must be brought into line with other professional work requiring similar education and experience if the museum profession is to attract and keep the best people. Minorities are severely underrepresented in the museum work force in general, and women are underrepresented at the higher management levels. These inequities must be redressed if the museum community is to become fully representative of the diversity of the society it seeks to serve.

◆ **Collaboration.** The key to making the best use of resources and generating the greatest impact is collaboration. Museums must work with one another to coordinate collections and programs and to increase public awareness and support. Through collaboration with schools, libraries and other cultural institutions, museums can better achieve their own goals. Collaboration with service clubs, health and welfare organizations and other community groups can lead to innovative programming that will bring new constituencies into the museum's halls.

Volunteers at the Milwaukee Public Museum last year donated 32,000 hours, helping staff catalog and maintain collections, giving tours to visitors and assisting in every aspect of museum operations.

Eleven cooperative conservation centers around the country are helping small and medium-sized museums meet their conservation needs.

To help scientists in breeding efforts for endangered species, data on more than 50,000 living mammals and birds in some 150 zoos around the world are included in the computer-based International Species Inventory System, headquartered at the Minnesota Zoological Gardens.

A computer program simulates the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge in an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum celebrating the bridge's centennial.

The museums in Rochester, New York, have banded together with local hotels, restaurants, recreational attractions and other organizations to promote tourism and the cultural resources of the city.

◆ **Public Awareness.** People know museums are good; they just don't know how good. The public enjoys museum visits but is generally unaware of the many activities that go into making those visits possible. Some people still hold the stereotype of museums as musty, dusty places that rarely change. Museums must correct that old notion and make people know them for the dynamic and complex institutions that they are.

A campaign to publicize the variety of museums—their collections, programs and functions—must be aimed at opinion leaders and the public generally. Heightened public awareness is essential if museums are to establish the base of philosophical and financial support they need to continue their essential public service into the next century.

◆ **Financial Stability.** Threats to federal funding and increased competition for private dollars mean difficult times for museums. The most pressing needs are for general operating expenses, funds for the care and organization of collections and capital expenses. Support for highly visible special exhibitions and programs is easier to find than for the less glamorous, “behind-the-scenes” aspects of museum work.

To achieve fiscal stability, museums need an organized, integrated approach to fund raising that is not crisis oriented. Collecting wisely and well the objects, artifacts and specimens of our natural and cultural heritage, developing significant exhibitions and stimulating educational programs, fostering sound leadership and increasingly professional staff, working with other cultural organizations and letting the public know about all these things are proof that museums are meeting their commitments responsibly. If the central significance of museums and their service to society are recognized, their financial requirements will likewise be recognized and responded to.

Because the information and recommendations in **Museums for a New Century** form the basis for this organized, integrated approach to the future, the book is essential reading for all museum professionals as well as for those who influence policy and support for America's museums. They and others who care about the cultural and educational life of our nation will be heartened to see the thorough and thoughtful approach America's museum community is taking to ensure a vigorous and lively future for itself and all it serves.

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